



Percosse o torture?

Frances Power Cobbe sulla violenza domestica (1878)

a cura di

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Ho intitolato questo saggio *Wife-torture* perché voglio che sia ben chiaro al lettore che il termine usuale di percosse trasmette un'idea dell'estrema crudeltà esercitata altrettanto remota dell'espressione "grattare la coda a un tritone" usata dai nostri candidi ed ingegnosi vivisezionisti quando si riferiscono all'atto di bruciare vivi dei cani o di recidere loro i nervi o di torturare una novantina gatti in una serie di esperimenti.

Così scriveva Frances Power Cobbe nel saggio dal titolo *Wife-torture in England* pubblicato nel numero di aprile-giugno del 1878 della "Contemporary Review" (pp. 55-87) quando la campagna anti-vivisezionista era al culmine. Le donne, infatti – lo dimostrava la documentazione giudiziaria – non erano solo battute, bensì torturate, prese a calci, mutilate, ustionate, accecate, uccise. Raramente i mariti si limitavano agli schiaffi, agli spintoni, agli sputi, ma si lasciavano andare ad un crescendo di maltrattamenti e di crudeltà. A questi episodi erano dedicati innumerevoli trafiletti privi di commento su ogni quotidiano che non richiamavano l'attenzione del lettore.

Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904), un'autrice il cui pensiero fino a tempi molto recenti è stato assai trascurato dagli studi, iniziò la sua campagna contro la crudeltà delle pratiche mediche e della ricerca scientifica all'inizio degli anni Sessanta¹. Nel 1875 aveva fondato la *National Anti-Vivisection Society* e il suo organo "The Zoophologist". In numerosi scritti, ma in particolare in *Wife-torture*, affermò la stretta

¹ Su Frances Power Cobbe si veda innanzitutto la sua autobiografia: *Life of Frances Power Cobbe, by Herself* (1894), Thoemmes, Bristol 2003; S.J. Peacock, *The Theological and Ethical Writings of Frances Power Cobbe, 1822-1904*, Mellen Press, Lewiston, N.Y. 2002; S. Mitchell, *Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian Feminist, Journalist, Reformer*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville 2004; L. Williamson, *Power and Protest: Frances Power Cobbe and Victorian Society*, Independent Publisher Group, London-New York-Chicago 2005; S. Hamilton, *Frances Power Cobbe and Victorian Feminism*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York-Basingstoke 2006. Si veda inoltre l'ampio profilo nel volume di B. Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1992, pp. 103-142. In particolare sullo scritto *Wife-torture*: C. Bauer-L. Ritt, "A Husband is a Beating Animal". *Frances Power Cobbe Confronts the Wife-abuse Problem in Victorian England*, in "International Journal of Women's Studies", vol. 6, 1983, 3, pp. 99-118; J. Schroeder, "Narrat[ing] Some Poor Little Fables": Evidence of Bodily Pain in "The History of Mary Prince" and "Wife-torture in England", in "Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature", vol. 23, 2004, 2, pp. 261-281; E. Dardenne, "Un épagueul, une femme et un noyer, plus nous les battons, meilleurs ils sont": Frances Power Cobbe, la féminité, l'altérité, in "Revue LISA/LISA e Journal", 2005, <http://lisa.revues.org/890>.

connessione tra l'impegno femminista e quello contro la vivisezione, entrambi volti a limitare la violenza maschile nei confronti di tutte le creature indifese. La violenza alle donne, diffusa in tutti gli strati della società ed in particolare nei quartieri popolari, era occultata, minimizzata, banalizzata, giustificata, presentata nella letteratura e negli spettacoli popolari come fonte di divertimento attraverso la figura dell'intollerabile moglie-megeira che ben meritava la sua sorte. La necessità della violenza consuetudinaria era prescritta dai proverbi: "Un cane, una donna, un noce, più li batti e più migliorano".

Benché Cobbe non sottovalutasse il ruolo della povertà, dell'alcolismo e delle misere condizioni abitative nel favorire gli scatti d'ira, individuava le vere cause della violenza nella svalorizzazione. Come gli animali, le donne erano considerate creature inferiori, non degne di rispetto, oggetti di proprietà. È una radicale alterità – spiega la femminista irlandese – che conduce alla tortura. Per la prima volta in questo saggio viene posta con chiarezza la relazione tra subordinazione femminile e violenza domestica.

Sulla base delle rilevazioni statistiche, della documentazione giudiziaria e dei rapporti di polizia, Cobbe traccia un quadro drammatico dei caratteri e delle conseguenze del "linciaggio domestico": 1500 casi di aggressioni particolarmente brutali (che causavano gravi mutilazioni, cecità e morte) erano discussi ogni anno nelle aule dei tribunali, ovvero quattro ogni giorno. Secondo le sue valutazioni, si trattava di meno di un terzo delle gravi aggressioni subite dalle donne. Eppure, la legge del 1857 (*Matrimonial Causes Act*) che rendeva possibile il divorzio nei casi di abuso (incesto, stupro, bigamia e crudeltà) era rimasta lettera morta, così come era rimasta inascoltata la denuncia del colonnello Edgerton Leigh alla Camera dei Comuni nel 1874. Neppure un rapporto ufficiale del Parlamento del 1875 (*Reports to the Secretary of State for the Home Department on the State of Law Relating to Brutal Assaults*) fu seguito da una iniziativa legislativa. La maggioranza dei giudici ascoltati nel corso dell'inchiesta, riconoscendo che la legge era stata inefficace, si espressero a favore della fustigazione, un provvedimento che Cobbe aborrisce perché avrebbe reso gli uomini ancora più brutali e ansiosi di vendicarsi. La legge, al contrario, avrebbe dovuto proteggere le donne sottraendole alla tirannia dei mariti.

Lo scritto di Frances Power Cobbe ebbe una vasta risonanza e contribuì all'approvazione del progetto di emendamento presentato da Leigh nel maggio 1878 (*An Act to Amend the Matrimonial Causes Act*) che garantiva la protezione e/o il divorzio nel caso di maltrattamenti, prevedeva l'affidamento dei figli alla madre e obbligava il marito a versare un contributo settimanale. Nel 1894 Cobbe scriverà nella sua autobiografia:

La parte del mio impegno per le donne che ricordo con maggior soddisfazione è quello che ha portato alla protezione delle povere mogli picchiate, storpiate, mutilate, calpestate dai loro mariti brutali².

Le pagine che seguono – tratte dalla "Contemporary Review" – riproducono, nella versione originale in lingua inglese, la prima parte dello scritto di Cobbe in

² F.Power Cobbe, *Life of Frances Power Cobbe, by Herself*, vol. 2, Houghton-Mifflin, Boston-New York 1894, p. 534.

cui l'autrice si sofferma sulle cause della violenza domestica, sulla sua tolleranza e giustificazione. Nel prossimo numero miscelaneo della rivista sarà pubblicata anche la seconda parte dedicata alla descrizione dei casi e ai rimedi proposti.

Wife-Torture in England (I)

It once happened to me to ask an elderly French gentleman of the most exquisite manners to pay any attention she might need to a charming young lady who was intending to travel by the same train from London to Paris, M. de ...wrote such a brilliant little note in reply that I was tempted to preserve it as an autograph; and I observe that, after a profusion of thanks, he assured me he should be "trop heureux de se mettre au service" of my young friend. Practically, as I afterwards learned, M. de ...did make himself quite delightful, till, unluckily, on arriving at Boulogne, it appeared that there was some *imbroglio* about Miss ...'s luggage and she was in a serious difficulty. Needless to say, on such an occasion the intervention of a French gentleman with a ribbon at his button-hole would have been of the greatest possible service; but to render it M. de...would have been obliged to miss the train to Paris; and this was a sacrifice for which his politeness was by no means prepared. Expressing himself as utterly *au désespoir*, he took his seat, and was whirled away, leaving my poor young friend alone on the platform to fight her battles as best she might with the impracticable officials. The results might have been annoying had not a homely English stranger stepped in and proffered his aid; and, having recovered the missing property, simply lifted his hat and escaped from the lady's expressions of gratitude. In this little anecdote I think lies a compendium of the experience of hundreds of ladies on their travels. The genuine and self-sacrificing kindness of English and American gentlemen towards women affords almost a ludicrous contrast to the florid politeness, compatible with every degree of selfishness, usually exhibited by men of other European nations. The reflection then is a puzzling one [55]. How does it come to pass that while the better sort or Englishmen are thus exceptionally humane and considerate to women, the men or the lower class of the same nation are proverbial for their unparalleled brutality, till wife-beating, wife-torture, and wife-murder have become the opprobrium of the land? How does it happen (still more strange to note!) that the same generous-hearted gentlemen, who would themselves fly to render succour to a lady in distress, yet read of the beatings, burnings, kickings, and "cloggings" of poor women well-nigh every morning in their newspapers without once setting their teeth, and saying, "This must be stopped! We can stand it no longer?"

The paradox truly seems worthy of a little investigation. What reason can be alleged, in the first place, why the male of the human species, and particularly the male of the finest variety of that species, should be the only animal in creation which maltreats its mate, or any female of its own kind?

To get to the bottom of the mystery we must discriminate between assaults of men on other men assaults of men on women who are- not their wives; and assaults of

men on their wives, I do not think I err much if I affirm that, in common sentiment, the first of these offences is considerably more heinous than the second – being committed against a more worthy person (as the Latin grammar itself instructs boys to think); and lastly that the assault on a woman who is *not* a man's wife is worse than the assault on a wife by her husband. Towards this last or *minimum* offence a particular kind of indulgence is indeed extended by public opinion. The proceeding seems to [56] be surrounded by a certain halo of jocosity which inclines people to smile whenever they hear of a case of it (terminating anywhere short of actual murder), and causes the mention of the subject to conduce rather than otherwise to the hilarity of a dinner party.

The occult fun thus connected with wife-beating forms by no means indeed the least curious part of the subject. Certainly in view of the state of things revealed by our criminal statistics there is some thing ominous in the circumstance that "Punch" should have been our national English street-drama for more than two centuries. Whether, as some antiquarians tell us, Judas Iscariot was the archetypal Policinello, who, like Faust and Don Juan, finally meets the reward of his crimes by Satanic intervention, or whether, as other learned gentlemen say, the quaint visage and humour of the Neapolitan vintager Puccio d'Aniello, originated the jest which has amused ten generations, it is equally remarkable that so much of the enjoyment should concentrate about the thwacking of poor Judy, and the flinging of the baby out of the window. Questioned seriously whether he think that the behaviour of Punch as a citizen and *père de famille* be in itself a good joke, the British gentleman would probably reply that it was not more facetious than watching a carter flogging a horse. But invested with the drollery of a marionette's behaviour, and accompanied by the screeches of the man with the Pan-pipe, the scene is irresistible, and the popularity of the hero rises with every bang he bestows on the wife of his bosom and on the representative of the law.

The same sort of half-jocular sympathy unquestionably accompanies the whole class of characters of whom Mr. Punch is the type. Very good and kind-hearted men may be frequently heard speaking of horrid scenes of mutual abuse and violence between husbands and wives, as if they were rather ridiculous than disgusting. The "Taming of the Shrew" still holds its place as one of the most popular of Shakespeare's comedies; and even the genial Ingoldsby conceived he added a point to his inimitable legend of "Odille" by inserting after the advice to "succumb to our she-saints, videlicet wives, the parenthesis, that is, if one has not a 'good bunch of fives'". Where is the hidden fun of this and scores of similar allusions, which sound like the cracking of whips over the cowering dogs in a kennel? [57].

I imagine it lies in the sense, so pleasant to the owners of superior physical strength, that after all, if reason and eloquence should fail, there is always an *ultima ratio*, and that that final appeal lies in their hands. The sparring may be all very well for a time, and may be counted entirely satisfactory *if they get the better*. But then, if by any mischance the unaccountably sharp wits of the weaker creature should prove dangerous weapons, there is always the club of brute force ready to hand in the corner. The listener is amused, as in reading a fairy tale, wherein the

hero, when apparently completely vanquished, pulls out a talisman given him by an Afreet, and lo! his enemies fall flat on the ground and are turned into rats.

Thus it comes to pass, I suppose, that the abstract idea of a strong man hitting or kicking a weak woman – *per se*, so revolting – has somehow got softened into a jovial kind of domestic lynching, the grosser features of the case being swept out of sight, just as people make endless jests on tipsiness, forgetting how loathsome a thing is a drunkard. A “jolly companions” chorus seems to accompany both kinds of exploits. This, and the prevalent idea (which I shall analyze by-and-by) that the woman has generally deserved the blows she receives, keep up, I believe, the indifference of the public on the subject.

Probably the sense that they must carry with them a good deal of tacit sympathy on the part of other men has something to do in encouraging wife-beaters, just as the fatal notion of the good fellowship of drink has made thousands of sots. But the immediate causes of the offence of brutal violence are of course very various, and need to be better understood than they commonly are if we would find a remedy for them. First, there are to be considered the class of people and the conditions of life wherein the practice prevails; then the character of the men who beat their wives; next that of the wives who are beaten and kicked; and finally, the possible remedy.

Wife-beating exists in the upper and middle classes rather more, I fear, than is generally recognized; but it rarely extends to anything beyond an occasional blow or two of a not dangerous kind. In his apparently most ungovernable rage, the gentleman or tradesman somehow manages to bear in mind the disgrace he will incur if his outbreak be betrayed by his wife’s black eye or broken arm, and he regulates his cuffs or kicks accordingly. The dangerous wife-beater belongs almost exclusively to the artisan and labouring classes, Colliers, “puddlers” and weavers have long earned for themselves in this matter a bad reputation, and among a long list of cases before me, I reckon shoemakers, stonemasons, butchers, smiths, tailors, a printer, a clerk, a bird-catcher, and a largo number of labourers. In the worst districts of London (as I have been informed by one of the most experienced magistrates) four-fifths of the wife-beating cases are among the lowest class of Irish labourers – a fact worthy of [58] more than passing notice, had we time to bestow upon it, seeing that in their own country Irishmen of all classes are proverbially kind and even chivalrous towards women.

There are also various degrees of wife-beating in the different localities, In London it seldom goes beyond a severe “trashing” with the fist – a sufficiently dreadful punishment, it is true, when inflicted by a strong man on a woman; but mild in comparison or the kickings and tramlings and “purrings” with hob-nailed shoes and clogs of what we can scarcely, in this connection, call the “dark and true and *tender* North”. As Mr. Serjeant Pulling remarks, “Nowhere is the ill-usage of woman so systematic as in Liverpool, and so little hindered by the strong arm of the law; making the lot of a married woman, whose locality is the ‘kicking district’ of Liverpool, simply a duration of suffering and subjection to injury and savage treatment, far worse than that to which the wives of mere savages are used”. It is in the centers of dense mercantile and manufacturing populations that this offence reaches its climax. In London the largest return for one year (in the Parliamentary

Report on Brutal Assaults) of brutal assaults on women was 351. In Lancashire, with a population of almost two millions and a half the largest number was 194. In Stafford, with a population of three-quarters of a million, there were 113 cases. In the West Riding, with a million and a-half, 152; and in Durham, with 508,666, no less than 267. Thus, roughly speaking, there are nearly five times as many wife-beaters of the more brutal kind, in proportion to the population, in Durham as in London. What are the conditions of life among the working classes in those great "hives of industry" of which we talk so proudly? It is but justice that we should picture the existence of the men and women in such place before we pass to discuss the deeds which darken it.

They are lives out of which almost every softening and ennobling, element has been withdrawn, and into which enter brutalizing influences almost unknown elsewhere. They are lives of hard, ugly, mechanical toil in dark pits and hideous factories, amid the grinding and clanging of engines and the fierce heat of furnaces, in that Black Country where the green sod of earth is replaced by mounds of slag and shale, where no flower grows, no fruit ripens, scarcely a bird sings; where the morning has no freshness, the evening no dews; where the spring sunshine cannot pierce the foul curtain of smoke which overhangs these modern Cities of the Plain, and where the very streams and rivers run discoloured and steaming with stench, like Styx and Phlegethon, through their banks of ashes, If "God made the country and man made the town," we might deem that Ahrimanes devised this Tartarus of toil, and that here we had at last found the spot where the Psalmist might seek in vain for the handiwork of the Lord [59].

As we now and then, many of us, whirl through this land of darkness in express trains, and draw up our carriage windows that we may be spared the smoke and dismal scene, we have often reflected that the wonder is, *not* that the dwellers there should lose some of the finer poetry of life, the more delicate courtesies of humanity, but that they should remain so much like other men, and should so often rise to noble excellence and intelligence, rather than have developed, as would have seemed more natural, into a race of beings relentless, hard, and grim as their own iron machines-beings of whom the Cyclops of the Greek and the Gnomes of the Teuton imaginations were the foreshadowings. Of innocent pleasure in such lives there can, alas!, be very little; and the hunger of nature for enjoyment must inevitably be supplied (among all save the few to whom intellectual pursuits may suffice) by the grosser gratifications of the senses. Writers who have never attempted to realize what it must be to hear ugly sounds and smell nauseous odours and see hideous sights, all day long, from year's end to year's end, are angry with these Black Country artisans for spending largely of their earnings in buying delicate food-poultry and salmon, and peas and strawberries, For my part, I am inclined to rejoice if they can content themselves with such harmless gratifications of the palate, instead of the deadly stimulants of drink, cruelty, and vice.

These, then, are the localities wherein Wife-torture flourishes in England; where a dense population is crowded into a hideous manufacturing or mining or mercantile district. 'Wages are usually high though fluctuating. Facilities for drink and 'Vice abound, but those for cleanliness and decency are scarcely attainable. The men are rude, coarse, and brutal in their manners and habits, and the women

devoid, in an extraordinary degree, of all the higher natural attractions and influences of their sex. Poor drudges of the factory, or of the crowded and sordid lodging-house, they lose, before youth is past, the freshness, neatness, and gentleness, perhaps even the modesty of a woman, and present, when their miserable cases come up before the magistrate, an aspect so sordid and forbidding that it is no doubt with difficulty he affords his sympathy to them rather than to the husband chained to so wretched a consort. Throughout the whole of this inquiry I think it very necessary, in justice to all parties, and in mitigation of too vehement judgment of cases only known from printed reports, to bear in mind that the women of the classes concerned are, some of them fully unwomanly, slatternly, coarse, foulmouthed – sometimes loose in behaviour, sometimes madly addicted to drink. There ought to be no idealizing of them, *as a class*, into refined and suffering angels if we wish to be just. The home of a Lancashire operative, alas! is not a garden wherein the plants of refinement or sensitiveness are very likely to spring up or thrive.

Given this direful *milieu*, and its population, male and female [60], we next ask, What are the immediate incitements to the men to maltreat the women? They are of two kinds, I think, general and particular.

First, the whole relation between the sexes in the class we are considering is very little better than one of master and slave. I have always abjured the use of this familiar comparison in speaking generally of English husbands and wives, because as regards the upper orders of society it is ridiculously overstrained and untrue.

But in the “kicking districts”, among the lowest labouring classes, Legree himself might find a dozen prototypes, and the condition of the women be most accurately matched by that of the negroes on a Southern plantation before the war struck off their fetters”. To a certain extent this marital tyranny among the lower classes is beyond the reach of law, and can only be remedied by the slow elevation and civilization of both sexes. But it is also in an appreciable degree, I am convinced, enhanced by the Law even as it now stands, and was still more so by the law as it stood before the Married Women’s Property Act put a stop to the chartered robbery by husbands of their wives’ earnings, At the present time, though things are improving year by year, thanks to the generous and far-seeing statesmen who are contending for justice to women inside and out of the House of Commons, the position of a woman before the law as wife, mother, and citizen, remains so much below that of a man as husband, father, and citizen, that it is a matter of course that she must be regarded by him as an inferior, and fail to obtain from him such a modicum of respect as her mental and moral qualities might win did he see her placed by the State on an equal footing.

I have no intention in this paper to discuss the vexed subject of women’s political and civil rights, but I cannot pass to the consideration of the incidental and minor causes or the outrages upon them, without recording my conviction that the political disabilities under which the whole sex still labours, though apparently a light burden on the higher and happier ranks, presses down more and more heavily through the lower strata of society in growing deconsideration and contempt, unrelieved (as it is at higher levels) by other influences on opinion. Finally at the lowest grade of all it exposes women to an order of insults and wrongs which are

never inflicted by equals upon an equal, and can only be paralleled by the oppressions of a dominant caste or race over their helots. In this as in many other things the educating influence of law immeasurably outstrips its direct action; and such as is the spirit of our laws, such will inevitably be the spirit of our people. Human beings no longer live like animals in a condition wherein the natural sentiments between the sexes suffice to [61] guard the weak, where the male brute is kind and forbearing to the female, and where no Court of Chancery interferes with the mother's most dear and sacred charge of her little ones. Man alone claims to hold his mate in subjection, and to have the right while he lives, and even after he dies, to rob a mother of her child; and man, who has lost the spontaneous chivalry of the lion and the dog, needs to be provided with laws which may do whatever it lies with laws to effect to form a substitute for such chivalry. Alas! Instead of such, he has only made for himself laws which add legal to natural disabilities, and give artificial strength to ready-constituted prepotence.

I consider that it is a very great misfortune to both sexes that women should be thus depreciated in the opinion of that very class of men whom it would be most desirable to impress with respect and tenderness for them; who are most prone to despise physical infirmity and to undervalue the moral qualities wherein women excel. All the softening and refining influences which women exert in happier conditions are thus lost to those who most need them, – to their husbands and still more emphatically to their children; and the women themselves are degraded and brutified in their own eyes by the contempt of their companions. When I read all the fine-sounding phrases perpetually repeated about the invaluable influence of a good mother over her son, – how the worst criminals are admitted to be reclaimable if they have ever enjoyed it, – and how the virtues of the best and noblest men are attributed to it, as a commonplace of biography, – I often ask myself, “Why, then, is not something done to lift and increase, instead of to depreciate and lower, that sacred influence? Why are not mothers allowed to respect themselves, that they may fitly claim the respect of their sons? How is a lad to learn to reverence a woman whom he sees daily scoffed at, beaten, and abused, and when he knows that the laws of his country forbid her, ever and under any circumstances, to exercise the rights of citizenship; nay, which deny to her the guardianship of *himself* – of the very child of her bosom – should her husband choose to hand him over to her rival out of the street?”

The general depreciation of women *as a sex* is bad enough, but in the matter we are considering, the special depreciation of *wives* is more directly responsible for the outrages they endure. The notion that a man's wife is his PROPERTY, in the sense in which a horse is his property (descended to us rather through the Roman law than through the customs of our Teuton ancestors), is the fatal root of incalculable evil and misery. Every brutal-minded man, and many a man who in other relations of life is not brutal, entertains more or less vaguely the notion that his wife is his *thing*, and is ready to ask with indignation (as we read again and again in the police reports), of any one who interferes with his treatment of her, “May I not do what I will *with, my own*?” It is even sometimes pleaded on behalf [62] of poor men, that they possess *nothing else* but their wives, and that,

consequently, it seems doubly hard to meddle with the exercise of their power in that narrow sphere!

I am not intending to discuss the question of the true relation between husbands and wives which we may hope to see realized when “Springs the happier race of human kind” from parents “equal and free” – any more than the political and social rights of women generally. But it is impossible, in treating of the typical case wherein the misuse of wives reaches its climax in Wife-beating and Wife-torture, to avoid marking out with a firm line where lies the underground spring of the mischief. As one of the many results of this *proton pseudos*, must be noted the fact (very important in its bearing on our subject) that not only is an offence against a wife condoned as of inferior guilt, but any offence of the wife against her husband is regarded as a sort of *Petty Treason*. For her, as for the poor ass in the fable, it is more heinous to nibble a blade of grass than for the wolf to devour both the lamb and the shepherd. Should she be guilty of “nagging” or scolding, or of being a slattern, or of getting intoxicated, she finds usually a short shrift and no favour – and even humane persons talk of her offence as constituting, if not a justification for her murder, yet an explanation of it. She is, in short, liable to capital punishment without judge or jury for transgressions which in the case of a man would never be punished at all, or be expiated by a fine of five shillings.

Nay, in her case there is a readiness even to pardon the omission of the ordinary forms of law as needlessly cumbersome. In no other instance save that of the Wife-beater is excuse made for a man taking the law into his own hands. We are accustomed to accept it as a [63] principle that “lynching” cannot be authorized in a civilized country, and that the first lesson of orderly citizenship is that no man shall be judge, jury, and executioner in his own cause. But when a wife’s offences are in question this salutary rule is overlooked, and men otherwise just-minded, refer cheerfully to the *circonstance atténuant* of the wife’s drunkenness or bad language, as if it not only furnished an excuse for outrage upon her, but made it quite fit and proper for the Queen’s peace to be broken and the woman’s bones along with it.

This underlying public opinion is fortunately no new thing. On the contrary, it is an idea of immemorial antiquity which has been embodied in the laws of many nations, and notably, as derived from the old Roman *Patria Potestas*, in our own. It was only in 1829, in the 9th George IV, that the Act of Charles II, which embodied the old Common Law, and authorized a man “to chastise his wife with any reasonable instrument”, was erased from our Statute - Book. Our position is not retrograde, but advancing, albeit too slowly. It is not as in the case of the Vivisection of Animals, that a new passion of cruelty is arising, but only that an old one, having its origin in the remotest epochs of barbarian wife-capture and polygamy, yet lingers in the dark places of the land, By degrees, if our statesmen will but bring the educational influence of law to bear upon the matter, it will surely die out and become a thing of the past, like cannibalism, – than which it is no better fitted for a Christian nation.

Of course the ideas of the suffering wives are cast in the same mould as those of their companions. They take it for granted that a Husband is a Beating Animal, and may be heard to remark when extraordinarily ill-treated by a stranger, – that they

“never were so badly used, no not by their own husbands”. Their wretched proverbial similarity to spaniels and walnut-trees, the readiness with which they sometimes turn round and snap at a bystander who has interfered on their behalf, of course affords to cowardly people a welcome excuse for the “policy of non-intervention”, and form the culminating proof of how far the iron of their fetters has eaten into their souls. A specially experienced gentleman writes from Liverpool: “The women of Lancashire are *awfully fond* of bad husbands. It has become quite a truism that our women are like dogs, the more you beat them the more they love you”. Surely if a bruised and trampled woman be a pitiful object, a woman who has been brought down by fear, or by her own gross passions, so low as to fawn on the beast who strikes her, is one to make angels weep?” [64].

To close this part of the subject, I conceive thon, that the common idea of the inferiority of women, and the special notion of the rights of husbands, form the undercurrent of feeling which induces a man, when for any reason he is infuriated, to wreak his violence on his wife. She is, in his opinion, his natural *souffre-douleur*.

It remains to be noted what are the principal incitements to such outburst of savage fury among the classes wherein Wife-beating prevails. They are not far to seek. The first is undoubtedly Drink-poisoned drink. The seas of brandy and gin, and the oceans of beer, imbibed annually in England, would be bad enough, if taken pure and simple”, but it is the vile adulterations introduced into them which make them the infuriating poisons which they are-which literally *sting* the wretched drinkers into cruelty, perhaps quite foreign to their natural temperaments. As an experienced minister in these districts writes to me, “I have known men almost as bad as those you quote (a dozen wife-murderers) made into most kind and considerate husbands by total abstinence”. If the English people will go on swallowing millions’ worth yearly of brain poison, what can we expect but brutality the most hideous and grotesque? Assuredly the makers and vendors of these devil’s philtres are responsible for an amount of crime and ruin which some of the worst tyrants in history might have trembled to bear on their consciences; nor can the national legislature be absolved for suffering the great Drink interest thus foully to tamper with the health-nay, with the very souls of our countrymen. What is the occult influence which prevents the Excise from performing its duty 88 regards these frauds on the revenue?

2. Next to drunkenness as a cause of violence to women, follows the other “great sin of great cities”, of which it is unnecessary here to speak. The storms of jealousy thence arising, the hideous alternative *possession* of the man by the twin demons of cruelty and lust – one of whom is never very far from the other – are familiar elements in the police-court tragedies.

3. Another source of the evil may be found in that terrible, though little recognized passion, which rude men and savages share with many animals, and which is the precise converse of sympathy, for it consists in anger and cruelty, excited by the signs of pain; an impulse to hurt and destroy ally suffering creature. rather than to: relieve or help it. Of the widespread influence of this passion (which I have ventured elsewhere to name *Heteropathy*), a passion only [65] slowly dying out as civilization advances, there can, I think, be no doubt at all, It is a hideous

mystery of human nature that such feelings should lie latent in it, and that cruelty should grow by what it feeds on; that the more the tyrant causes the victim to suffer the more he hates him, and desires to heap on him fresh sufferings.

3. Among the lower classes the emotion of Heteropathy unmistakably finds vent in the cruelty of parents and step-parents to unfortunate children who happen to be weaker or more stupid than others, or to have been once excessively punished, and whose joyless little faces and timid crouching demeanour, instead of appeals for pity, prove provocations to fresh outrage. The group of his shivering and starving children and weeping wife is the sad sight which, greeting the eyes of the husband and father reeling home from the gin-shop, somehow kindles his fury. If the baby cries in the cradle, he stamps on it. If his wife wring her hands in despair, he fells her to the ground.”

4. After these I should be inclined to reckon, as a cause of brutal outbreaks, the impatience and irritation which must often be caused in the homes of the working classes by sheer *friction*. While rich people, when they get tired of each other or feel irritable, are enabled to recover their tempera in the ample space afforded by a comfortable house, the poor are huddled together in such close quarters that the sweetest tempers and most tender affections must sometimes feel the trial. Many of us have shuddered at Miss Octavia Hill’s all-too-graphic description of a hot, noisome court in the heart of London on a fine summer evening, with men, women, and children “pullulating”, as the French say, on the steps, at the windows, on the pavement, all dirty, hot, and tired, and scarcely able to find standing or sitting room. It is true the poor are happily more gregarious than the rich. Paradoxical as it sounds, it takes a good deal of civilization to make a man love savage scenery, and a highly cultivated mind to find any “pleasure in the pathless woods” or “rapture in the lonely shore”. Nevertheless, for moral health as much as for physical, a certain number or cubic inches of space are needed for every living being.

It is their interminable, inevitable propinquity which in the lower classes makes the nagging, wrangling, worrying women so intolerably trying. A miller gets accustomed, it is said, to the clapping of their mill, so may some poor husbands become deaf to their wives’ tongues; but the preliminary experience must be severe indeed.

These, then, are the incentives to Wife-beating and Wife-torture. What are the men on whom they exert their evil influence?

Obviously, by the hypothesis, they are chiefly the drunken, idle, ruffianly fellows who lounge about the public-houses instead of working for their families, without pretending to affirm that there are no sober, industrious husbands goaded to strike their wives through [66] jealousy or irritation, the presumption is enormous against the character of any man convicted of such an assault. The cases in which the police reports of them add, “He had been bound over to keep the peace several times previously”, or “He had been often fined for dankness and disorderly behaviour,” are quite countless. Sometimes it approaches the ludicrous to read how helplessly the law has been attempting to deal with the scoundrel, as, for example, in the case of William Owen, whom his wife said she “met for the first time beside Ned Wright’s Bible-barrow”, and who told the poor fool he had been “converted”. He was known to Constable 47 K as having been convicted *over*

sixty times for drunkenness and violent assaults; and the moment he left the church he began to abuse his wife.

The pitilessness and ferocity of these men sometimes looks like madness. Alfred Stone, for example, coming home in a bad temper, took his wife's parrot out of its cage, stamped on it, and threw it on the fire, observing, "Jane I it is the last thing you have got belonging to your father!". In the hands of such a man a woman's heart must be rushed, like the poor bird under his heel.

Turn we now from the beaters to the beaten. I have already said that we must not idealize the women of the "kicking districts", They are, mostly, poor souls, very coarse, very unwomanly. Some of them drink whenever they can procure drink. Some are bad and cruel mothers (we cannot forget the awful stories of the Burial Clubs); many are hopelessly depraved, and lead as loose lives as their male companions. Many keep their houses in a miserable state of dirt and disorder, neglect their children, and sell their clothes and furniture for gin. Not seldom will one of these reckless creatures pursue her husband in the streets with screams of abuse and jeers. The man knows not where to turn to escape from the fury. When he comes home at night, he probably finds her lying dead drunk on the bed, and his children crying for their supper. Again, in a lesser degree, women make their homes into purgatories by their bad tempers. There was in old times a creature recognized by law as a "Common Scold", for whom the punishment of ducking in the village horse-pond was formally provided. It is to be feared her species is by no means to be reckoned among the "Extinct Mammalia". Then comes the "nagging" wife, immortalized as "Mrs. Caudle"; the worrying, peevish kill-joy, whose presence is a wet blanket – nay, a wet blanket stuck full of pins; the argumentative woman, with a voice like a file and a face like a ferret, who bores on, night and day, till life is a burden" [67].

These are terrible harpies, But it is scarcely fair to assume that every woman who is accused of "nagging" necessarily belongs to - their order, I have no doubt that every husband who comes home - with empty pockets, and from whom his wife needs to beg repeatedly for money to feed herself and her children, considers that she "nags" him. I have no doubt that when a wife reproaches such a husband with squandering his wages in the public-house, or on some wretched rival, while she and her children are starving, he accuses her to all his friends of intolerable "nagging", and that, not seldom having acquired from him the reputation of this kind of thing, the verdict of "Serve her Right" is generally passed upon her by public opinion when her "nagging" is capitally punished by a broken head.

But *all* women of the humblest class are not those terrible creatures, drunken, depraved, or ill-tempered; or even addicted to "nagging". On the contrary, I can affirm from my own experience, as well, I believe, as that of all who have had much to do with the poor of great cities, there are among them at least as many good women as bad as many who are sober, honest, chaste, and industrious, as are the contrary. There is a type which every clergyman, and magistrate, and district visitor will recognize in a moment as very common: a woman generally small and slight of person, but alert, intelligent, active morning, noon, and night, doing the best her strength allows to keep her home tidy, and her children neat and well fed, and to supply her husband's wants. Her face was, perhaps, pretty at eighteen: by

the time she is eight-and-twenty, toil and drudgery and many children have reduced her to a mere rag, and only her eyes retain a little pathetic relic of beauty. This woman expresses herself well and simply: it is a special “note” of her character that she uses no violent words, even in describing the worst injuries, There is’ nothing “loud” about her in voice, dress, or manners. She is emphatically a “*decent*” respectable woman. Her only fault, if fault it be, is that she will insist on obtaining food and clothing for her children, and that when she is refused them she becomes that depressed, broken-spirited creature whose mute, reproachful looks act as a goad, as I have said, to the passions of her oppressor.